

WOMENS PROGRAMS- THE TIMES THEY ARE A' CHANGIN'

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The birth of women's programs

Women's programs have been around now for 10 or so years. The changes in this short time have been remarkable. We have gone from humble beginnings to grand happenings.

Women's programs are continuing to make a difference to the quality of women's holiday experiences, and we believe to other aspects of women's lives also.

The programs began as a result of feedback women instructors were receiving from female guests. "I feel like I've gone backwards", "I did not enjoy the instructors approach", "I'm completely confused" were common phrases repeated to women instructors after female guests had taken part in a group lesson. And the most concerning of all feedback- "I feel like I can't ski at all now!"

Often taught by male instructors, female guests felt their emotional needs were not met. In what was then a male dominated sport, most teaching techniques came from the masculine perspective.

And so the Woman's Program was born.

Initially, programs dealt with the need to teach the *whole skier*. The best way to explain the *whole skier* is to relate coming for a ski lesson to going to the doctor (the former a much more enjoyable experience). When you go to a good doctor they don't just treat the symptom, they treat the cause. They also take into consideration that the person may not only have a physiological response to their ailment, but they also will have a psychological response as well. Hence Women's programs around the world began to address this need in female skiers in the beginning and this premise still remains, if not more sophisticated and developed now. In fact, there has been a shift in the greater industry to teaching the *whole skier*, and we would like to believe that women instructors all over the world were in a small way part of instigating this change.

Part of the initial success of Women's programs came from the benefits of sharing their learning experience with other women. Women feel they can express their thoughts and frustrations more freely in this environment. Another benefit came from the knowledge that other women felt the same way. And great strides forward in performance have been made based solely on the presence of other like minded-like feeling women. Negative thoughts cannot be dealt with and relegated to the rubbish bin if internalised and left to grow in strength and size. A nasty demon ready to ruin a holiday!

As programs developed, scientific knowledge of the difference between male and female bodies was identified. In tandem with this, women (who have traditionally been thought of as not understanding or wanting too much technical information) started to voice their questions. "Why?" became a question that needed to be answered. The gender based differences were shared with women, and as a result a different approach to some technical aspects of teaching. Morphing from this realisation came the altering of equipment to make it easier for women to achieve their goals.

And we arrive at today's program.

Programs today

Today's programs cover all the bases. It is rare that a program cannot fulfil the needs of a participant. But are we necessarily telling our guests what to expect?

The challenge of capturing the essence of a program in a short marketing spiel is difficult for all mountains. Often, the explanation used has not been changed for years, and this is often where we confuse potential participants.

Our ladies are sometimes perplexed by the message of these marketing spiels. "Is it a hand holding session?", "Do we ski hard?", "Will we be pushed?", "Will I be in the right group?" These are valid concerns for someone who has never taken part in a program before.

Programs today will state a list of contents, often including race day, video analysis etc. But what about the other important question? What will be

different between a group lesson and a women's program? Or more importantly "**HOW** are you going to teach me?"

Generally, here is a list of what participants can expect:

- Ladies will be initially placed into a group where common goals are shared, and skiing is similar.
- During the first day or so, changes from group to group may occur to place Ladies in a more suitable group.
- The first day or so is spent on basic skills, refining what skills participants already possess. It is an important time to fully understand the importance of these basic skills, and how they relate to the female body. During this part of the program, ladies will "find their feet". Instructors get to know the *whole skier* and formulate plans for each participant to meet their goals.
- The bulk of each program differs depending on the group and what they want to achieve. However the basic framework exists, and will be listed in the marketing spiel for each mountain.
- Expect to be challenged! The environment is a nurturing one so the challenge will feel different to previous experiences. You will be taken outside your comfort zone, but you may not have the same emotional reaction to it. The experience of fear will begin to change.
- Usually some discussion takes place about the differences between men and women, and sometimes equipment modification is covered.

What to look for in a good women's program instructor:

- The most important task for a women's program instructor is to develop a climate of trust, quickly!
Find out who the instructors will be. Call them, or go for a ski with them before the program commences. Many women's program instructors will happily meet you for a drink to help answer any questions you may have.
Look for someone with a warm manner and excellent communication skills.
If they are not available call the Co-Ordinator of the program. They are often the best person to talk to as it is hard to know which instructor group you will end up with.

- The instructor should have a solid technical knowledge. But equally important will be their understanding of positive thinking techniques, self-concept and its effects, and behavioural change. They may not use these words but they should have an understanding that creating an atmosphere for optimal performance must include technical understanding (how your body works, what you physically must do), and emotional response understanding (how you can place yourself in the best psychological space for success).
- They should love their sport, and be passionate about teaching. Remember they will be motivating you when you are about to make your first turn down *that* run!
- They must ask for and understand **your** goals.
- They must have a sense of fun. So very important when teaching anybody!
- They should have an interest in all participants (not just their own group).
- And lastly, your instructor must have the ability to guide social interaction and team dynamics.

This time is often a highlight of the instructor's season. That has certainly been the case for us, and we have friendships and memories that we cherish from our experiences. Hopefully you should have this response when you finish the program too!

The future

As the numbers grow, instructors and co-ordinators have a unique opportunity to affect further change in the programs offered to women. Some resorts as present only offer one program. In our case, we have a 5 day program aimed at the basic parallel (blue run) skier and above. The approach, we believe should be three-pronged.

1/Beginner program-

Let's get women involved and addicted to the sport!

This should be a weekend or two day program only as once participants get to their 3rd day, differences in pace of learning become obvious, and splitting the group too much can cause disruption to bonds formed.

2/Early Intermediate program-

Now we have introduced them to the sport, let's get them through that difficult snowplough to parallel stage, thus leading to the confidence and technical know how to see more of the mountain.

3/Mountain explorer-

Now they have those basic skills, take the participants to the next stage- all-mountain masters!

Depending on the size of the resort, there is an opportunity to provide Snowboarding, Cross-Country or Telemarking programs.

We foresee there being a place for male instructors in women's programs in the future. If they possess the understanding and skills required, then there is no reason why they could not teach a women's group! They also bring a different perspective to the table.

Gender differences

So what are those gender differences and how do they change how we teach a women's program?

The differences are two fold-

Anatomical

Psychological

Anatomical- A lot has already been written about the anatomical differences between males and females, and this information has driven the changes in equipment design.

A woman has a lower and longer calf muscle, needing a wider cuff and a shorter cuff height.

The angle of the femur entering the hip socket is greater than in a man, creating a knock kneed affect in some women (commonly referred to as the Q-angle). Some adjustment can be made to the foot bed and boot to help this alignment, but in some females it is just the way they are built.

In some women who have generous hips and bottom, the centre of mass is changed, creating balance challenges.

Upper and lower body strength between men and women are markedly different. Just ask the rookie instructor who has spent a lot of time teaching beginners. They will tell you that generally women tend to be more able to turn the skis with their feet and legs, while men will want to turn the

skis with their upper body and arms. Women tend to be stronger in their lower body compared to their upper body, while men are the opposite.

Psychological- Generally women get involved in sport because they are attracted to the skill development, personal improvement, the nurturing environment and the social network. Men's motivation will often be based on the thrill of competition.

Positive re-enforcement is critical to the performance of females, as this will directly impact their self-concept and internal dialogue. Men will often ignore positive re-enforcement, it is simply not a huge priority as it does not directly link to their motivation. They are more interested in being praised for coming first, but are not always focused on knowing why they came first! Women tend to have a low level of self-confidence. Men tend to already possess confidence in their ability. To increase performance this area must be addressed by the instructor. The common mistake is to flood the participant with praise. Praise should be genuine, and specific, otherwise it will not be of value to the self-critical woman.

Women tend to analyse performance and seek to know why things happen the way they do. Men prefer to spend more time on the move, and will understand by experimenting. If new skills are not explained a woman will not trust the new-found skill and confidence issues will come to the fore.

We continue to learn more about these differences as the years roll by. They come about through scientific research into elite female/male athletes, and have direct impact on how our sport is taught.

Remember these are purely generalisations, and there are exceptions. However, to quote Ashley Fischer, fellow Co-Ordinator of a Women's Program in Sugarbush USA "These are all generalisations, but I have found over the years that these generalisations have been formed for a reason."

To be a successful program in today's ski world, instructors and co-ordinators alike continue to evolve their programs.

The learning process is cyclical. We all learn from each other. Ask any women's program instructor about a memorable learning experience that furthered their teaching knowledge. They will inevitably come up with what they learned from a participant.

Sharing information is the key. Feedback from participants is critical, and information sharing across the instructor community is equally important.

We must get more women on the slopes enjoying their sport on their terms.
And we believe that women's programs are the key.

Log-on to www.hotham.com.au for more details about L'Oreal Visible Results
Women's Program at Mount Hotham, or e-mail Lisa Kilpatrick
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